

CSR Connection

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Managing to Change: What Schools and Districts Can Do to Develop and Maintain High Performance

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*"Altering context is not up to others; all of us can, to a certain extent, change the immediate context around us – and this starts us down the pathway of transformation."
— Michael Fullan (2003, p. 29).*

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We cannot change what is going on inside schools without thinking seriously about how schools and districts can deal with the limited resources and conflicting demands in the surrounding environment. Yet, we cannot expect policymakers to create perfectly aligned policies and supply the needed resources on their own. Schools and districts have to be able to participate in the creation of the conditions they require to be successful. In order to understand how schools and districts can work together, we need to rethink conventional views of school capacity.

Defining Capacity as a Function of Resources and Demands

In common use, “capacity” has numerous connotations that are relevant for considerations of school performance and school reform. Most connotations of capacity conjure up images of empty containers waiting to be filled. Other common images are those of factories able to reach their performance targets, individuals able to engage in certain activities or achieve certain goals, and legal agents with power and status to exert authority over others.

For a long time, we treated schools as containers waiting to be filled. We assumed that they did not have the capacity for high performance because they did not have sufficient resources. We thought that if we gave them the necessary money, technical assistance, and other resources, they would be able to implement policies, operate effectively, and improve perform-

ance. But this assumption ignores a fundamental paradox that schools face: We are trying to improve schools because we do not believe many of them have the capacity for high performance, but we assume that they do have the capacity to change their curriculum, assessments, structures, organizational practices, professional development, staffing arrangements, schedules, and more, all at once.

In many cases, the resources or technical assistance provided to low-performing schools, even though they are needed and could be helpful, can end up causing problems, not solving them. This assistance requires more time, meetings, and professional development than these already struggling schools can dedicate to them. In other words, reform efforts themselves create a whole set of demands that many schools, particularly low-performing schools, lack the capacity to meet. Looked at in this way, schools are less like containers waiting to be filled up “enough” or factories that could meet demands if they performed up to their capacity. In this view, schools are more like elastic, rubber bands that only have the capacity to be stretched so far. Unfortunately, this analogy provides little help because it suggests that all we can do is try to figure out how much we can do in schools before they “snap.”

Another analogy, however — specifically a consideration of the capacity of municipal water systems — might enable us to develop a view of capacity that illuminates what it takes for schools to develop the ability to learn, change, improve, and sustain improvements over time. In many ways, the issues of capacity in education are similar to those faced by administrators of municipal water systems earlier in the 20th century. At that time, in order to meet the needs of a growing population and a newly industrialized society, a much larger supply of water was required. The initial response was to try to increase capacity by building more dams and reservoirs and increasing their size. From this perspective, the capacity of the system was determined by the amount of water

Capacity, *noun*,

1. The ability to receive, hold or absorb.
2. A measure of this ability; volume.
3. The maximum amount that can be contained: a trunk filled to capacity.
4. The maximum or optimum amount of production: factories operating below capacity.
5. The quality of being suitable for or receptive to specified treatment: the capacity of elastic to be stretched.
6. The ability to learn or retain knowledge.
7. The ability to do something; faculty, aptitude.
8. The position in which one functions; role: his capacity as host.
9. Legal qualification or authority: the capacity to make an arrest.

(adapted from
<http://www.merriam-webster.com> definition)

that could be contained. But as the population grew, the problems associated with building more dams and reservoirs — including the economic and ecological costs — made it clear that increasing supply could not be the only means of building water capacity. In other words, they could only stretch the supply of water so far.

In response, strategies for building water capacity expanded to include efforts to manage the demand for water. Time, resources, and attention were devoted to developing appliances and other devices that required less water and to educating the public about the benefits of conservation. By controlling the use of water in this manner, the need for construction of new dams and reservoirs diminished. The amount of water available at any given time became only one part of the equation for determining water capacity: Capacity is a function of the resources available (in this case water) and the demand that exists.

It is also important to note that in order to ascertain the capacity of their systems over time, water managers have had to learn how to take into account a wide range of factors — including shifts in weather patterns, ecological changes, influences of new technologies, and the impact of changing demographics. If they fail to address these factors, they will be unable to determine how to increase supply and manage demand most effectively. Similarly, they cannot just focus on the capacity of a single reservoir or single municipality. They have to take into account the capacity of the entire system.

While there are vast differences between water systems and educational systems, drawing an analogy between them suggests that it may be useful to define school capacity in terms of the resources available and the demand that is likely to exist. In this formulation, the capacity of a school is affected by its ability to receive and use resources, implement certain policies and practices, and act on and influence the surrounding environment.

The situation is just like it was at the turn of the century for water. We have limited funds, limited time, and limits on such things as high-quality professional development and teacher preparation. We cannot just turn on a spigot and suddenly have more; however, we have policies and reform efforts that demand more. For example, participants in numerous reform efforts have found that their biggest concern is the need for more time. Unfortunately, we can only stretch the time available so far. As a result, we have to manage the demands on the time of administrators, teachers and students, and use time more effectively.

Managing School Capacity: Learning from Experience

What can we do to help schools to find the needed resources and shape the demands around them so they can make improvements and meet higher standards? In order to address this question, it helps to quickly draw some examples from a study of four schools from the past several years. The schools in this study were selected because they have had good reputations and relatively good records of performance in comparison to nearby schools with similar populations. They are all schools of choice, which means that selection of students is based on an application and lottery. Two are urban, two suburban; two have a traditional instructional approach, and two have a more progressive orientation (see box on page 4). The lessons from these schools are not meant to suggest that all low-performing schools can match the performance of these schools, but to convey a sense of what it might take for schools to develop the capacity to find needed resources and manage external demands.

Looking across the four schools one finds that, despite relatively high student performance over the long term and good reputations, these schools have experienced a host of problems and periods of crisis. Throughout their history, these schools have had strong principals, power-

ful collaborative faculties, and involved parents, but they have not had them all the time: they do not consistently display the features often associated with successful schools. In fact, at times, they experience some of the same problems that we often associate with low-performing schools. For example, Peninsula — one of the suburban schools — has had five principals in eight years, scandals around fiscal mismanagement, and serious tensions between parents and teachers. At City, serious issues arose around the ability and willingness of some staff to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Dewey and Emerson also struggled on a number of occasions with controlling staff turnover and finding new teachers. All the schools have gone through periods when, as a former lead teacher at Emerson put it, "people really didn't have a clue as to what was going on in other people's classrooms."

In order to overcome these kinds of problems, the members of these schools are involved in a number of critical practices: they monitor and revisit their mission and goals; create or take advantage of professional development opportunities that meet their needs; and manage hiring and

turnover (in order to find participants who "fit" their communities). They do not take the policies, plans, people, or professional development opportunities offered to them as givens. At each school, many members of the school staff and sometimes parents as well — not just the principals — are out in the district and the surrounding area helping to explain the school's mission and goals, finding and recruiting qualified staff, and demanding or developing alternative policies and professional development experiences.

Monitoring and Revisiting Missions and Goals

These schools did not continually develop new missions or strategic plans focused around narrow objectives. Instead, staff at each school developed and cultivated a broad understanding of the school's approach and key practices, and they created occasions for staff to share best practices, for parents to learn about the work in the classrooms, and for board members and district administrators to learn about the school's approach. These steps, in turn, provided a basis for distributing leadership and enabling many members of the school community, school staff, parents, and district administrators to make deci-

Four Study Schools with Lessons to Share*

Urban K-8

"City" – 583 students: 22% Limited English Proficient (LEP), 36% Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRL), 71% Asian

Instructional approach: "3 R's," emphasis on academics and homework

"Emerson" – 305 students: 33% LEP, 43% FRL, 36% Latino, 25% Asian

Instructional approach: Mixed-age classes, projects, rotating teacher-leaders, community involvement

Suburban K-5

"Peninsula" – 350 students: 2% LEP, 4% FRL, 47% Asian, 43% White

Instructional approach: "structured approach," homework, no parents in classroom

"Dewey" – 419 students: 3% LEP, 4% FRL, 73% White

Instructional approach: Mixed-age classes, projects, emphasis on "whole child"

*School names are pseudonyms.

sions and find resources that fit the needs of the school.

Furthermore, if the members of these schools ran into problems, they responded by focusing attention on different practices as needed and managing their operations in a balanced way. They avoided spreading themselves thin by trying to invest equal time in each problem or focusing on them simultaneously.

Revisiting Missions and Creating Effective Professional Development Opportunities

At Dewey, in the wake of California's class size reduction (which brought in a slew of new teachers who knew almost nothing about the school's progressive orientation) a new principal, with the district's blessing and participation, set out to involve the school staff, parents, and district administrators in two endeavors: (1) learning about the origins and history of the school and (2) identifying and rearticulating the key ideas and practices the school should pursue. Once they had rearticulated their mission, they then had a basis for recruiting and screening appropriate teachers. They could make clear to the district and local teacher education programs the kinds of teachers they needed, and they could establish a whole set of professional development structures in order to meet their needs.

Similarly, the staff at Emerson often spends time during a retreat and over the summer considering the school's mission, goals, and progress and has had considerable success in finding teachers who are committed to advancing the mission. But with a number of young teachers, and the associated turnover, they have also had to develop an elaborate structure of meetings and professional development opportunities to ensure that all their students are getting the same high level of instruction in all their classes.

Managing Hiring and Turnover

In contrast, at City, bringing people to consensus around a new mission had

failed on several occasions. While the school continued to perform well, a number of teachers continued to teach as they had always taught, without much regard for their changing student population. In response, a new principal used the opportunities that came with class size reduction to hire new teachers who had experience working with more diverse populations. In turn, those teachers brought in new expertise, which they shared, resulting in a much better atmosphere in which the members of the school could reexamine their mission and goals. At Peninsula, they were successful for many years without seriously examining their mission or expending much energy on professional development structures because of a stable population of veteran teachers who took it upon themselves to advance their skills. Also, when there were teacher openings, members of the staff themselves sought out experienced colleagues who they believed shared their philosophy.

Leveraging Resources and Monitoring the Environment

Managing missions, managing staff, and managing professional development are not strictly under the control of the schools. Their ability to carry out these practices and perform at relatively high levels depends on the relationship between the school and the district and surrounding community. In short, schools cannot manage their environments on their own and districts on their own cannot create an environment that fits the needs of every school and constituency. They have to learn to work together.

What can schools and districts do to work together to find resources and manage demands?

Allow for Focus and Flexibility

First, they can allow for focus and flexibility. While schools need to accept that there are crucial threads and goals that cut across schools, there must also be room for schools to develop a productive

and positive sense of their own mission and identity. When school and district personnel share this understanding of the school's approach and needs, then they can make decisions and take actions that support rather than conflict with one another. But that also means we have to turn from a focus on faithful implementation to productive adaptation. Policies and programs can become watered-down and useless if they are not implemented effectively, but some adaptations are also required to make them work in different contexts, with different students and schools.

Match Teachers with Schools

Second, we need to find ways to match qualified teachers with appropriate schools. One of the biggest problems facing schools today is the inequitable distribution of qualified teachers, and the complete inability to place teachers in schools and positions that match their level of experience, and their values. Numerous issues make such "matching" difficult, but it may not be impossible. We have developed systems for matching medical students to medical schools, which may be flawed, but still serve a purpose. At the same time, there is no way to match the values and experiences of teachers to schools if teachers, administrators, and parents do not have a common understanding of the missions, practices, and identity of their schools.

Foster Effective Communication Between Schools and Districts

Third, we need to create arenas where the district and school members can develop productive relationships and learn about one another's work. District staff have to get into schools and school staff have to get out of their schools, and both groups have to find meaningful tasks on which they can work together. For example, at Dewey, the district wanted to impose a new report card that many members of the school community felt was inconsistent with their focus on the "whole child." In response, the principal formed a study group that included district administrators,

a board member, school staff, and parents to review their assessment procedure. As a result, the school made some improvements to its own reporting process and gained a waiver from the district's new policy. The district adapted some aspects of Dewey's reporting system for their own report card. By making sure that members of their schools are out in the community serving on committees and consulting with support providers, schools can exert an influence on policies and programs before they are imposed upon them.

Reward Professional Development

Fourth, we have to recognize and reward the acquisition of job skills and responsibilities. Many of these collaborative activities require shifts in responsibilities that are unrecognized in current job descriptions and assessment and reward systems, particularly for district administrators. As Meredith Honig from the University of Maryland has pointed out, administrators are having to shift from being responsible for the oversight and control of the implementation of specific policies, to working in less hierarchical ways. Instead of delivering instructions and resources to schools, many administrators need to be able to find the information and resources required by the schools.

Build Public Understanding

Finally, school and district personnel need to work together to build public understanding of the strengths and needs of schools. Too often schools, districts, and support providers end up sending mixed messages about what good teaching looks like and how schools should operate. As a result, they end up contributing to the conflicting expectations that make their work so difficult in the first place. Instead of promoting their own conclusions about what needs to be done, key individuals and organizations need to work together to promote the public consideration and discussion of the teaching that goes on in their communities.

Conclusion

In summary, enabling schools and districts to work together requires that we think differently about capacity. We must recognize that

- Providing needed resources and implementing good programs can help to build capacity, but also can create demands that schools do not have the capacity to meet.
- The capacity of schools depends on capacity throughout the system. We have to take into account the capacity of support providers, districts, state departments, foundations, and others (almost all of whom are struggling with their own capacity problems).
- Capacity needs are dynamic. The capacity to hit performance targets at one moment in time may not be the same as the capacity needed to make improvements and sustain performance over time.
- Outcome measures alone reveal little about school capacity. We also need to

know if schools have the people, mechanisms, and district support necessary to monitor and revisit goals, find qualified staff, and secure appropriate professional development.

In the end, efforts to build capacity have to go far beyond figuring out the "role" of districts in schools; they have to encompass efforts to erase some of the boundaries that have forced schools and districts to operate as if they had separable needs and functions. Capacity cannot depend solely on the school, the district, or a support provider. It is a shared and distributed responsibility. Capacity will grow out of thoughtful and strategic efforts to take advantage of one another's strengths, to be honest about one another's weaknesses, and to collaboratively adapt and evolve strategies that fit the strengths and goals of each organization, taking into account the resources and demands in the environment.

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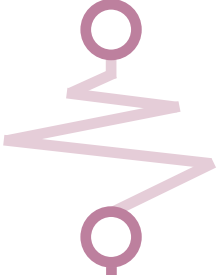
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